

Hospitals, senators want more data on mental-health releases

By Jordan Schrader
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Guests tour a Tacoma evaluation and treatment center before it opened to provide 16 new beds for involuntarily committed mental patients, funded by the Legislature in 2013. The tour was part of MDC's anniversary celebration.

LUI KIT WONG — Staff photographer

A court order barring detention without treatment for people with a dangerous mental illness was [greeted by state officials with worry that they would have to turn patients away without care.](#)

More than two months after the landmark state Supreme Court ruling took effect, hospitals say it's still not clear if that's happening or how often.

State senators unanimously agreed Wednesday to a request from hospitals to have state government collect more data.

"Testimony indicates that some people are still being turned away without services because there are no beds that can be found within the time limits," Sen. Linda Evans Parlette, R-Wenatchee, said on the floor of the Senate just before the 48-0 vote to send [Senate Bill 5645](#) to the House.

Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee reacted to the court ruling by securing space for 145 extra patients, a move that [lawmakers ratified last month.](#)

But a shortage of room remains in state hospitals and in the evaluation-and-treatment centers where short-term detentions are supposed to happen. [The Legislature has provided money to operate more centers, but hasn't always paid to build them.](#)

Local hospitals are voluntarily accepting some patients when room can't be found elsewhere — if the hospitals can meet new state treatment standards. But are others being turned away without treatment because of a lack of beds?

“There's not a systematic way to collect that, currently,” said Chelene Whiteaker, policy director for the Washington State Hospital Association.

The hospital association-backed bill puts the reporting responsibility on local mental-health workers who decide whether to detain someone.

While data is scant, the state Department of Social and Health Services says it's closely monitoring cases when there's trouble finding a spot for a patient. The state hired an extra employee to solve those problems when calls come in, DSHS said.

Also Wednesday, the Senate approved a bill that would allow family members to ask a judge to step in if a mental health professional will not involuntarily commit a relative they believe could be suicidal or a danger to others.

Senate Bill 5269 passed Wednesday on a 46-3 vote and now heads to the House, which passed its own version of the bill earlier this year. The law is named “Joel's Law” for Joel Reuter, who was suicidal when Seattle police shot and killed him during a standoff in 2013.

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